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SUBJECT: IN MIZORAM AND BURMA BAMBOO FLOWERING MAY BRING FAMINE

REF: A) KOLKATA 07 00353, B) DHAKA 00110

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11. (U) This is an action request. Please see paragraph 13.

12. (SBU) Summary: The Northeast Indian state of Mizoram, wedged between Burma and Bangladesh, is at the height of an acute food and grain shortage due to the destruction of crops by an exploding rat population. Approximately every 50 years, the flowering of a species of bamboo leads to a significant growth in the rodent population, which devastates crops including rice, the Mizo's dietary staple. The latest cycle of bamboo flowering began in 2005 and is now reaching its peak. The Government of Mizoram (GOM) has declared the state a disaster area and has sought GOI assistance in meeting assistance needs. The GOI has provided some relief, but more is required. In particular, Burmese Chin villagers living along the border in both India and Burma are facing a severe food shortage, and there are claims that some are on the verge of starvation. Post believes USG efforts should be made to assess the situation in Mizoram and if warranted provide humanitarian assistance for this regional problem. End Summary.

Mautam Descends

13. (U) The Northeast Indian state of Mizoram, wedged between Burma and Bangladesh, is suffering an acute shortage of food grain due to the destruction of crops by rats. Nearly 93 percent of the state is covered with a single species of bamboo that flowers every 48 years - a phenomenon called "Mautam." When the flowers appear, the plant produces fruit whose seeds are eaten by jungle rats. The proliferation of the flowers and fruit results in a sharp increase in the rat and insect populations which devour crops and stored grains in the state. The ruling Mizo National Front (MNF), which came into being following the last Mautam in the 1950s declared the state a "disaster area," and has sought an additional Rs. 187 crore (USD 46 million) from the Central Government.

A Flawed Plan

14. (U) On March 3, PolOff met with Mizoram Director for Food, Civil Supplies & Consumer Affairs T. B. C. Rozara, who outlined the discussions between the GOM and the GOI on managing the food crisis. In 2004-2005 in anticipation of the Mautam, the GOM

submitted a plan for maintaining food supplies, known as the Bamboo Flowering and Famine Combat Scheme (BAFFACOS), to the GOI. The BAFFACOS included an attempt at increasing Mizo purchasing power and diversification by shifting crop production to durable, tradable items such as turmeric and ginger, which were considered "rat proof." (Note: Traditionally, Mizo farming practices were single crop, slash and burn operations, known as "jhum cultivation." End Note.). The GOM also began construction of warehouses for food storage and encouraged people to invest, to save money, and to purchase supplies to prepare for the food shortage. Over the past two years, the GOI gave grants of over Rs. 100 crore (USD 25 million) to enhance Mizo purchasing power. In 2007, the state doubled wages for farmers under BAFFACOS and increased the rice quota from 2 to 3 kilograms per adult per week. The GOM also offered a reward of one rupee for every rat killed.

15. (U) BAFFACOS has fallen short of the people's needs. Presently, the GOI provides 6,640 metric tons of food grains per month to the Mizoram Public Distribution System (PDS). The GOI provides food grains to State governments at separate prices for Below Poverty Line (BPL) and Above Poverty Line (APL) families. The Central Issue Price (CIP) for rice for distribution to BPL families is Rs. 565 per quintal (a quintal is 100 kg) (approx. USD 145/metric ton) and for APL families is Rs. 830 per quintal (approx. USD 210/metric ton). Rice is available at Rs. 5.65 (USD .14) per kg for BPL families and for Rs. 9.30 (USD .23) per kg for APL families at ration shops under the PDS across Mizoram as against Rs. 18 (USD .45) to Rs. 20 (USD .50) per kg in the open market.

16. (U) As per GOI rules, each family is allotted only 35 kg of rice per week through the PDS. This quantity is not sufficient for families in Mizoram as the average family size is large (5-6 persons per family) and rice - the dietary staple - is eaten three times per day. Since November 2007, the GOM has been purchasing an additional 5,000 metric tons per month at Rs. 1445 per quintal (approx. USD 360/metric ton) to meet the shortfall

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in supply. (Note: According to ration card figures from the PDS, the dependent population numbers roughly 1.1 million. End Note.). The additional supply of rice is distributed through the ration shops and is made available to BPL and APL families at the regular PDS prices, with the State government absorbing the cost differential. However, the problem is that even though rice is available, most BPL families do not have the purchasing power to buy additional quantities. (Note: In the last year, the world price of rice has risen considerably, with prices of up to USD 500/metric ton for rice being exported out of Thailand, for example. End Note.). Rozara said his department compiles weekly reports on families facing food shortages.

17. (U) Rozara was realistic about the efficacy of the BAFFACOS plan, saying that there were some success stories but also many failures. He pointed out that corruption, endemic to India, diverted some funds from their intended purposes. Compounding the problem is Mizoram's lack of infrastructure. There is only one major road connecting Mizoram to the rest of the Northeast and India - connecting through Assam and Meghalaya. There is also a narrow gauge railway line (currently under conversion to the standard broad gauge) as well. Travel from the capital, Aizawl, to the Burma border takes at least six hours by car. Dean of Aizawl University Professor Lianzeala commented to Poloff that the BAFFACOS plan was a good one, but that the GOM had not taken into account the inadequate infrastructure for transportation to markets, the lack of proper marketing of new products, and inherent corruption in the system. As a result, most Mizos quickly lost confidence in the GOM's scheme.

Who Can Help?

18. (U) Much of Mizoram's public welfare system is run by a combination of church activism and the non-government Young Mizo

Association (YMA), which acts as a de facto civilian arm of the government. GOM officials state openly that they depend on the YMA and church groups to "reach" people in rural districts. The YMA has set up a fairly efficient distribution system where villages and families all contribute to the well-being of their neighbors. It is also active in raising awareness and education on social issues, including AIDS, domestic violence, and drug abuse. Poloff met with three YMA leaders who assessed the GOM response to the food crisis as "inadequate." They believed that the GOM should have provided more seeds to farmers and recognized the connectivity problems in getting assistance to rural areas. They also observed that the GOM response was long-term, geared at changing agricultural practices in the state, and did not meet immediate food needs.

¶9. (U) YMA leadership takes a dim view of Burmese migrants from Chin state, although the Burmese are ethnically identical to Mizos. A commonly held view is that the Chin migrants are responsible for a range of social and economic ills in Mizoram - the growing crime and unemployment rates, increasing IV drug use, and crowding, among others.

For Burmese Chins, It's Worse

¶10. (SBU) Post has reported on the difficult situation of Burmese Chins living in Mizoram (reftel A). Burma's Chin state borders Mizoram to the east. Chairman of the Chin National Council (CNC) Salai Chinzah, who traveled 14 hours by road from Mizoram's southern town of Saiha to meet with Poloff, said Burmese Chin villagers living along the border are facing food scarcity and are on the verge of starvation. Chinzah estimates that half of Chin state in Burma is covered by bamboo. He said that UNDP representatives had come to collect data on the bamboo flowering problem, and that an NGO called the Chin Christian Relief Committee had set up an office in Aizawl on February 20 to assist Chins with relief management. Poloff inquired about other organizations able to offer/channel assistance to Burma, and Chinzah listed: the Zomi Baptist Association (works in Champai and northern Chin state), the Christian Baptist Association, the Mara Evangelical Church, the Mara Youth Association (MTP), the Mara People's Party (NZMPP), the Zomi National Congress, the Chin National League for Democracy, Aid Zomi (a local NGO), and the Zomi Economic Planning and Development Association (ZEPADA). He also noted that a Japanese NGO had provided 40 tons of food grain, routed from Kolkata through the NE state of Manipur and into Burma.

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¶11. (SBU) Chinzah insisted that the Chins are aware of "the U.S. interest in helping the Chin people," and that they are waiting for a response from the U.S. Government. He showed Poloff a list of 38 people from six households in Chin state who had migrated to Mizoram in search of food. Chinzah says he is collecting more names of people being displaced by the Mautam and will provide it to Poloff. Chinzah recognized that the GOM assistance was meant for Mizo people only, not Chins.

¶12. (SBU) Embassy Rangoon Comment: We have alerted WFP to the problem, which will send a Burmese employee to Chin State to make a "small assessment." Access for foreigners to make assessments in Chin State will be difficult due to Burmese military restrictions on access for humanitarian assistance providers. The pre-dominantly Christian Chin are among the poorest ethnic minorities in Burma. They are also very pro-American due to their past experiences with American missionaries. Due to access problems inside Burma the best way to get assistance to them may be across the border through Mizoram.

Action Request

¶13. (U) Based on our PolOff's observations in Mizoram and Reftel B, Post has identified: 1) a growing lack of affordable

grain for people in Mizoram, Bangladesh and portions of Burma;
2) a lack of funding for the GOM to purchase grain from the GOI
and a corresponding reduction of people's purchasing power; 3) a
need for immediate action due to the likelihood that the monsoon
rains (June-November) will make transportation and communication
with rural districts difficult. Post requests that USAID New
Delhi discuss the situation in Mizoram with the GOI (Ministry of
Home Affairs and National Disaster Management Authority) and
send an assessment team to Mizoram to visit the rural areas.
Post is prepared to facilitate such a visit.

¶14. (U) Embassy Dhaka and Embassy Rangoon cleared this cable.
JARDINE